

CHAPTER ONE

The wind rushed through David's hair, tossing the dyed-black locks with a gray coating of ash. David crouched low on the scout-craft, the bullet-proof windshield tucking up around him, his hands curled around the cannon controls. He could feel the shape of his rifle strapped to his back, but it felt too slim, the metal insignia sleeve, the "verum," gone from around the barrel.

With a shift of his hips, he turned the scout-craft to weave through the soon-to-be-incinerated trees, eyes scanning for enemy. Behind him, the Desolation, an old DX-1200 scavenged from the enemy early in the war, lumbered along. It rattled and belched its noise at him, and even though it hovered a good ten feet above the ground, the earth shook with the sound of its coming.

He could hear the squeaks and clanks of the hover-propellers, and, below all that, the steady growl of its incinerator. The growl meshed with the sparking pops of grass and branch and leaf charring into dust.

David breathed deep through his face mask, a cut and embroidered piece of silk that wrapped around his face and tucked into his dark-blue uniform. Despite its softness, the cloth caught at the base of his head where dark, blotted scabs formed a rectangle — the incision marks from his recent surgery.

He bowed his head, colorless eyes still searching as he stretched his neck, trying to relieve some of the itching tension around the mark. A dull surge of nausea rolled over in his stomach as he felt the embedded chip resist the movements of his neck, the chip hard and stiff in between the shifting flesh of his neck.

Static burst from the radio nested in the dashboard. "Jex to Silas." David tensed at the name. His . . . New name. His left hand punched the transmit button, his right still holding the cannon control.

"Come in, Jex," David replied. His voice was light, only slightly husked from the omnipresent ash.

"All is clear behind, no sign of an ambush. Any signs up ahead?" Jex's voice crackled back.

"None." David leaned forward, and the scout-craft responded with a burst of speed.

"Good," Jex said. "Our own Galgivan ash is bad enough. I *hate* getting the Qurainians' smoke on me. It's almost worse than their gunfire. Their smoke *never* washes out of the silk."

David's mouth crooked in a half-smile. In his mind, he could see Jex, bent over his own scout-craft, a black-silk scarf poking out of his uniform, matching his elegant face mask. It would have the same embroidery on it as David's face mask. After all, it was simply an extra of one of Jex's own scarves.

Jex had thrown the scarf in David's face this morning after seeing him

stumble in the night before, pale face blasted with ash. The soft bundle had slumped down David's face. "The cloth is already black. Let's not let your lungs match it, shall we?" Jex had said, his thick black eyebrows raised in mock challenge.

The smile on David's face tried to complete. But a wave of lethargy pulsed from his implant. He groaned, and breathed deep. Finally, he punched the transmit button. "I'm glad you brought your best suit out on a scorch mission," he managed.

"They were the only clothes I had," Jex said with a sniff.

David's weak chuckle drained quickly. It was hard to laugh after what had happened only a few weeks before. After . . . The implant in his neck itched, and a memory, thick with color, tried to press against his skull. His rifle felt as thin as a bone against his back. He bowed his head again, trying to stretch the stiff spot while scanning the forest.

There was nothing ahead but forest. And the forest would be less desirable to the Qurainians than the fields Jex had checked. It was ready crops the Qurainians needed more than the scavenging of a forest. But the fields would be burning any moment now as the Desolation thundered ponderously through. The fields had been left weeks ago by forewarned Galgivans.

David sighed, and then finally tipped his head up, searching the tops of the trees. Qurainians had larger crafts than their own, and the smoke stack was almost always visible. David wove between the sinuous tree trunks, their whipping branches tangling the sunlight. There was no sign of –

David punched the transmit button again. "Jex, come in. Smoke trail due south." He felt something twist in his stomach. Like the strangling of some terror. The feeling tried to rise, tried to plant its claws in his stomach, tried to turn his thoughts from what he must do if he found a Lish. But then the implant kicked in. The emotion subsided. He would go. He had to go.

He turned his craft sharply, the edge of the hovering machine just scoring the soft earth. The stack was too thick to be one of theirs. "It appears to be receding. Qurainians may have decided to leave this area. But I should check."

"I see it," Jex responded. "I'm almost level with it." There was an audible sigh. "I'll head after it."

David's body froze. He felt a heartbeat, pass, then another. Then he relaxed a fraction. "After all that work to keep your silk clean?"

There was another sigh. "Perhaps the ladies will think it's dapper. Jex out."

"Silas out, and monitoring." David spurred his craft faster, hovering seamlessly over the undergrowth of the forest. The noise of the Desolation, though far behind, seemed to press against him and numb his skin. He wouldn't have to see the Lish. He wouldn't have to . . . Think about that. Just yet. He took a deep breath. No Lish yet. But still, He would swing wide, scanning for any troops left behind by the Qurainians.

The Qurainians liked to use Lish as soldiers. Quiet, obedient, deadly... It was

these Lish that had kept the Galgivans pent up in their steadily shrinking land. The Galgivans did not have sophisticated enough implants to create Lish soldiers. Only Lish slaves . . .

His hand went involuntarily to the back of his head. The ridges of scab stood out strongly, even through the tied silk. He wasn't sure how his own implant was possible. It was certainly less deadening than the slave implants.

A shot of static flared from his radio. David turned his head, waiting for Jex's snarky voice. But that was not the voice that fed through the radio. "Found any Lish, Silas?" David tensed at low voice. It was about an octave deeper than Jex's and hollow, like an echo from a cave.

David curled his right hand tighter around the cannon control as his left hand moved to punch the transmit button. "Silas to Mr. Coll. Not yet." He glanced at the transmission frequency. It had been changed to some number he did not know. He bit his tongue. Mr. Coll must have rigged his radio to respond on a private frequency.

Over the radio, David could hear something click in the background. "Your father truly made a magnificent verum," Mr. Coll's voice said.

David's eyes narrowed. The narrow barrel of his gun seemed to dig into his back.

"The fit is good, and I've never seen such a vibrant metal-dye. Truly crimson." There was a sigh from the radio. "It is a worthy object to represent the rights of our Galgivan men."

An image bloomed into David's mind: The image of Mr. Coll, his broad but hollow body seated in his hand-carved chair aboard the Desolation. His skin was the light brown of Galgivans, a far richer color than his own stubbornly pallid skin. Mr. Coll's long, agile fingers were carefully screwing David's gleaming red verum along the barrel of his own rifle. A line of sweat ran down David's neck, and something stirred again in his stomach, an emotion. But a lethargy seeped from his implant, arresting him until the name of the emotion slipped away from him. The implant itched so much . . . And the emotion sat like a lump of metal in his stomach. Dull, painful, and inert.

"I have encountered no Lish," David said, his voice flat.

"Oh?" Mr. Coll's voice said lightly. "And what of the smoke stack?"

David's breath caught. The strangled terror tried to rise again. "Jex was closer." He said shortly. "I am scouting for soldiers left behind. I could find . . . Other Lish." Other images were pressing against his mind, images from the past. He could catch snatches of colors—brown burdens burying pale faces, faces as pale as his, and another brown object, a coffin, and a hand, a hand snatching the verum. He shook his head, smearing the pulsing images until they bled out of focus. The ash-thick air stroked his hair again, and he could see the dark trees passing by, their colors dulling from the blowing ash. "I will report when I see Lish movement, as sworn." He tightened his hand around the cannon control.

"So formal, so . . . *Honorable*," the voice responded, sounding amused. "So

honorable that you let a chance to *redeem* that honor slip away. Ah, you are like a potter at an empty wheel. The wheel can spin, but there is no clay to form. Without this verum, Silas" there was a pause, and David could almost hear Mr. Coll's hand stroking the gleaming metal, "you have no clay with which to form your honor.

"You must prove yourself. You must prove yourself a *beautiful* mercenary," Mr. Coll's voice caressed the word, "by bringing me two, gray, severed Lish hands."

At those words, an image sprang before his eyes, the colors bleeding with light, defining the contours of one of the white faces—a face with soft, wrinkled skin, and gray eyes that met his in one urgent moment of lucidity. *Abina*, the old woman's name whispered through his mind.

The scout-craft turned with a twist from David, the edge of the craft squealing against the dirt. David stared at the brown dirt spitting against the windshield, letting the brown cover the pale face in his mind. And with a quick, controlled movement, he cranked the eject lever.

The scout-craft's seat sprang up in response, and David pushed off, adding his leap to the height of the chair's propulsion, sailing clean over the craft's windshield, high enough to turn a tight flip before landing, crouched, on the dirt-sprayed grass.

He remained in position for a moment, the adrenaline of the movement coursing through him in a welcome reprieve from his nameless, sedated emotions.

"Oh, bravo, beautiful flip," Mr. Coll's voice drifted from the craft's radio. "I think you'll make a good killer yet, Silas." The voice was cheerful. "Once you get over those little . . . Foibles. Once *David* is truly buried."

David's mouth tightened. The image of the brown coffin had sprung forward again. He remembered watching it, hidden in a craft. He could see the nail heads stamping each edge, clamping a "David" inside. And then the yellow, red, and ghostly blue of a torch blurred over the image, lowering, lowering, until it tapped the edge of the dry wood.

David stood, blinking furiously until he could see only ash-brushed forest. He realized he had taken a few steps forward.

"Silas . . . I hope you don't still think of yourself as David," the voice from the radio came quietly. David froze. "Because if there is any David left in you, I will assure you are *inside* the coffin next time. That *David*," he curled the word in disgust, "is a Lish."

David's whole body jerked as he dived at the radio's transmit button. "I am not Lish," he hissed.

"Well, not *full*. That would be preposterous. I think your father said you're a quarter?"

David closed his eyes. The roiling emotions tumbled like rocks in his stomach.

"That explains why there are none of those gray transmission lines on your hands. Lucky you, or that implant would be the same as any other slave's. None of this walking-about-and-thinking-on-your-own stuff. And," there was a light chuckle, "this insignia sleeve would definitely not be coming back to you."

"That insignia sleeve *will* be coming back to me, Mr. Coll," David said. He was surprised by how light his voice sounded with how hard his teeth were clenched.

"Of course. Just prove to me you no longer harbor any . . . traitorous sympathies, and the last of David Hyer, all the parts that did not stick in that coffin, can finish *dying*. And Silas Law will be born, with all the rights of a verum-bearing Galgivan.

David realized he was staring at his hands, splayed over the radio. Their white skin was chapped red at the knuckles. The skin always wore easily, as if it were too thin, leaving him with a perpetual itch, an itch like... One hand had raised to scratch the hard scab at the base of his neck. He withdrew his hand and swung his rifle around into position. His hands fumbled along the barrel to find the stock, not recognizing its shape without the verum he had carried since his passage to manhood. He needed space. He needed space from that devilish voice. That Mr. Coll.

Without a word, he turned from the craft and walk into the forest.

"Going for a stroll are we?" Mr. Coll's voice came sharper than before.

David stopped, his whole body hard with tension. He had forgotten that, somehow, Mr. Coll could see through his eyes. He clenched his eyes shut, though he knew it did no good, and felt the heel of his foot against the ground, poised for another step.

A host of images swirled in his mind. And over them all was the thick, sickening color of flame. He realized he was sweating.

But then another image rose. That same face. White, wrinkled, and looking at him with a sudden terror of need. Abina. The old, white face, usually deadened by a slave implant, blooming to life.

The flames in his mind receded. He needed that insignia sleeve. He needed to save Abina.

With a tight twist of his feet, he turned back to the scout-craft. He stared at his finger as it hovered over the transmit button. He did *not* want to connect to Mr. Coll.

The finger touched against the button. "Permission to scout on foot," he said curtly. "The scout-craft is out of the Desolation's current scorch-path, and surprising Lish will be more likely without the scout-craft's noise."

"Permission granted," Mr. Coll said, sounding amused. "Assuming you follow protocol, of course."

David blinked as his brain scrambled for protocol. He'd only been part of this division for a week. Just since . . . His burial.

There was static over the line, and then Mr. Coll's voice came in again. "The

protocol that requires soldiers to remain in communication with their superiors at all times. Clip that radio to your belt."

David's heart dropped down into his stomach, joining the other muffled, but roiling emotions. "Yes, Mr. Coll," he said numbly. His hands picked up the radio and, quick, precise, fixed the radio to his belt.

David looked up from his scout-craft, marking the Desolation's position. It's scorch pattern would lead it to the left of his craft for a good hour before turning back this way. The Desolation was a hulking black shape on the horizon, wide as a castle, hovering high enough to break and burn a forest. Its wide, flat form left an empty trail behind it, a field of flaking gray ash. To either side, churning in the hot, ashy blasts, swayed the trees. They were amazing, twisted, organic compositions. But in the end, they were just beings who had not yet been disassembled to their barest parts: flakes of ash.

David turned from the Desolation, his grip tightening on his rifle. The Desolation would not be the only thing killing today. He stepped towards the trees, their rifted trunks rising high, open, strong. But they, too, would turn to ash. He disappeared into the forest.